

Uncovering Mysteries in the Iraqi Desert

By Sergeant Jodie Stansbury




There are many mysteries hidden under the sand dunes of the Iraqi desert, and soldiers of Alpha Company, 142d Engineer Battalion (Combat)(Heavy), North Dakota Army National Guard, had the opportunity to help uncover five of them.

The land surrounding Peacan Base is littered with man-made sand hills intended to conceal Iraqi fighter jets. Many soldiers have yearned for the chance to dig them out, but until now they had no authorization. A team from the Iraq Survey Group (ISG), consisting of American, British, and Australian soldiers, was sent to the abandoned Iraqi air base where the 142d Engineer Battalion is located, with authorization to unearth five of the preserved aircraft hidden there to study their capabilities.

The team called on the engineers to help excavate the jets to shorten the recovery process from possible months to just days. Without the assistance of the engineers and their equipment, the jets would have been dug out by hand, which would not have been a good mission for any soldier in the desert heat.

The project, completed in five days, was one of teamwork and patience. The joint crews excavated one jet per day, working from 0500 until noon. The work hours were crucial to the mission, not only to prevent heat casualties but also to avoid working around the aircraft when excessive heat creates volatile conditions for the jet's fuel and any ammunition that might still be stored inside.

The aircraft, once uncovered from the sand, were towed back to a hangar at the air base by a heavy equipment transport trailer, and numerous ground guides made sure the jets made it back in one piece. Once within the secured perimeter, the Russian-made fighter jets were then either stripped of necessary parts or parked to wait for transportation to the United States for further research into their power and capabilities.

The combined efforts of the coalition forces showed the soldiers the endless possibilities of working together. 

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A soldier from the 142d Engineer Battalion uses a Bobcat® to dig out the wheels of a jet.